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ABSTRACT

Role-playing and simulation are recommended as effective methods of introducing business content into Russian language courses. The advantages of role-playing, which make it a flexible and effective tool throughout the foreign language curriculum, are discussed. Use of role-play in introductory courses is addressed, but focus is primarily on use in more advanced courses. Proper techniques for use of simulation exercises are examined and several different exercise types are presented. The simulations and role-plays suggested here are structured to require the use of business themes, cultural information, and problem-solving and to provide opportunities for using language in varied ways. It is suggested that language teachers charged with preparing students for careers in business devote a significant portion of class time to communicative activities such as role-playing. (MSE)

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Business-Related Simulation Exercises in the Russian Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates role-play and simulation exercises as an effective means of introducing business content into Russian language courses. The advantages of role-play, which make it a flexible and effective tool throughout the foreign language curriculum, are discussed. The utilization of role-play in elementary courses is treated, but, as more has been written on the utilization of role-play at the elementary level, the paper focuses on its implementation in advanced courses. Proper methods for the implementation of simulation exercises are examined and several different types of exercises are presented. The simulations and role-plays suggested are structured so as to require the use of business themes, cultural information and problem solving, as well as providing opportunities for using language in a number of different ways. It is suggested that language teachers, charged with preparing students for careers in business, devote a significant portion of class time to communicative activities such as role-play.

Business-Related Simulation Exercises in the Russian Classroom

Despite the fact that most texts treating Russian for business purposes still concentrate on mastering specific skills like producing business correspondence, contracts and other commercial documents, when asked what criteria they employ in hiring workers for positions which require foreign language skills, personnel managers of large corporations consistently emphasize other types of language skills.[1] H. Merklein, for example, reported in his extensive survey of multinational corporations that overall, technical (business) skills were most valued, followed by the ability to adapt to new environments (cross-cultural skills) and then knowledge of a language. Merklein emphasizes that language ability here refers to true language fluency and not simply to the achievement of basic skills.[2] In separate surveys of business professors and corporate personnel conducted by Christine Uber Grosse and Patricia Cholakian, comprehending and communicating were overwhelmingly selected as the most valued foreign language skills. Some business professors in Grosse's study ranked business correspondence as the least important of the skills listed, while others named grammar.[3]

Given the importance placed on communication and comprehension skills by most employers, it makes sense that business language courses go well beyond the development of technical writing and vocabulary skills and emphasize those activities which will increase the communicative competency of students. One would expect that such activities would form the basis of business language classes; but they should also be emphasized in the

general language classes that lead up to them, in which we should expect a considerable business-related content. Most Russian programs cannot afford the luxury of separate tracks for business students and, therefore, their special needs should be met, in as far as is possible, in general language courses, while, at the same time, maintaining a broadbased curriculum for students with other interests. As a number of investigators have pointed out, any teacher wishing to introduce authentic material into the classroom must consider business-related topics; for in our world, business-related decisions and transactions are made by everyone on a daily basis.[4] Certainly, as we reassess our curriculum with an eye to fine tuning and improving, we need to keep in mind that there are some activities which are very effective at both increasing communicative competence and introducing business related content. Perhaps the most beneficial of these is role-play, and in the present paper I would like to advocate simulation exercises first as a means of introducing business content into our courses, but also of increasing the usefulness and value of our general language curriculum, for all students, not only those interested in language for business.

Role-play and simulation exercises have a number of advantages which make them a flexible and effective tool throughout the curriculum. First, they are one of the most consistently effective means of lowering the affective filter in the language classroom. Flexible enough to meet the needs of a wide variety of students, role-plays allow the shy student to adopt another persona and perform in front of a small group, while their more extroverted classmates are permitted to maintain their own identity and perform in front of the entire class. Perhaps the single largest deterrent to the effective application of roleplays is a lack of creativity or flexibility on the part of the instructor. In an article on group work and communicative competence, Michael Long extols the benefits of simulation activities practiced in small groups which "release (students) from the need for 'accuracy at all costs' and (give them) entry into the richer and more accomodating set of relationships provided

by small group interaction."[5] Long goes on to point out that this more intimate interaction may be lost if we don't allow more subjective factors to motivate group formation. He states that "unless teachers allow either friendship, interest or sociometric grouping, they run the risk of imposing as arbitrary a composition on the small group as that which prevailed in the lockstep class."[6]

A second advantage of role-plays is that they are very adaptable and may be used at any level. Simple role-plays are often employed in basic language courses and in oral tests designed to measure the survival skills of beginning students. All too often, unfortunately, this is where they stay, for simulation is often viewed as an elementary level activity with more limited possibilities in the advanced classroom. As we shall see in this paper, where I will concentrate on the more advanced levels, combining role-plays with a problem solving dimension and more complex situations makes them a valuable tool in third and fourth-year courses.

A third advantage of simulation is that it lends itself to a great variety of conversation topics and vocabulary. This aspect makes role-play a useful means of integrating business-related topics into general language courses. The supplementation of such material to textbook units is accomplished quite easily and can generally be done, without the introduction of excessive amounts of new vocabulary, by utilizing the conversational topics presented in the text and giving them a business twist. For example, in a "getting acquainted" unit, instead of having a student play the role of an exchange student in Moscow who introduces herself to her new roommate and finds out where things are located in the dorm, she becomes a businessperson who comes to the Moscow branch office and must meet her Russian colleagues and tell them a little about herself. In general language courses, students should always be given a choice of role-plays, with some utilizing a business perspective and others remaining broader in scope.

Closely connected to the topic advantage is the flexibility which role-plays offer in the type of language to be presented. Before more sophisticated linguistic and cross-cultural communication is stressed at the advanced level, both in the general language sequence and in business language courses, students must master the differences between various types of language such as social, formal, informal or business. In mastering vocabulary and grammatical forms, students need to be aware not only of their meaning, but also of the social significance that the words carry. Americans are often seen standing puzzled in Russian stores because in reply to the question "May I look at that book (Можно посмотреть эту книгу?)" they receive the enigmatic reply "Yes, you may (Да, можно)," and no action, as if the query were a hypothetical question and not a request (Russians would expect a more direct request). American replies to answers, which from our point of view our considered rude and obtrusive, such as "How much do your earn?" or "How much did you pay for your house?" can be equally puzzling to Russian questioners. Role-play is a very effective means of introducing and practicing the "social rules" of language, necessary for effective communication. In this case, viewing videos of native speakers engaged in such exchanges and then discussing the videos before doing the role-play, can be beneficial in familiarizing students with these crucial socio-cultural differences.[7] In addition to the "social rules" of language, grammatical structures such as past tense or passive narration can be targeted. In Russian, for example, requiring the students to describe emotional feelings might elicit a greater number of impersonal constructions, or asking them what they did last summer, will result in past tense narration.

One additional feature of simulation that should be mentioned is the ease with which it can be utilized with video. Many teachers have found that videotaping students works best when they are not using pre-prepared materials. Videotaping simulation exercises can make it easier for students, and teachers, to assess progress in oral/aural

skills. Clara Orban points out that many elements of speech such as the individual's knowledge of grammar, idioms, pronunciation, intonation and gesturing can be analyzed easily on video. Students, who may be asked some day to deal with clients, should be aware of what messages they are transmitting through speech patterns, social attitudes, and body language.[8] Role-play, because of the way it emulates real speech and involves learners in meaningful discourse, makes all these features more readily apparent to both students and evaluators.

Once the decision is made to use simulation in business language instruction, the question of its implementation arises. As more has been written in the past about utilizing role-plays at the elementary level, I will pay a bit more attention in this paper to the uses of simulation in more advanced classes. Before doing so, however, let me briefly outline how role-plays are employed in first-year courses at Michigan State University, since more sophisticated utilization of simulation at the higher level presupposes student familiarity with role-plays at the elementary level.

Currently we are using a textbook which does not have simulation exercises in it.[9] For each lesson in the text we have been able to identify one or more topics which receive special emphasis in the dialogues, reading texts and target vocabulary. All of what we call communicative activities in each unit are centered on these topics. As part of a coursepack, the students are given activity sheets as part of a coursepack that list suggested conversation themes and role-play situations. For example, one of our unit topics is everyday work and leisure activities. In class, we break students into small groups and have them work on conversational assignments such as: "Interview each other and find out what your classmates will be doing on the next break, or find out how your partner plans to spend the summer." After this warm-up activity we have students choose one of a substantial

number of role-plays, which they would like to perform. Once again, using the topic work and leisure activities some possible situations would include:

I. General Situations (Work and Leisure Activities)

a. A small group of Russian students has arrived at your university for a short visit. You have been asked to make local arrangements for the group. Introduce yourself and explain what you will be doing for the rest of their first day (it is now 1:00 p.m.).

b. One of the visiting Russian students would like to know the work and leisure activities of American students. Answer his/her questions.

c. One of the visitors expresses the desire to go to a few local stores. Find out what he/she is interested in and make a few suggestions.

These are just a few of the situations that may be created for this topic. Given the number of Russian visitors we have had on our campus recently, the possibility certainly exists that this scenario could easily become a reality, a fact which, usually, increases the enthusiasm of students. Some of these activities may be appealing to students interested in business language, but with only a few basic changes, we are able to create alternatives designed to benefit them more directly. For example:

II. Business Situations (Work and Leisure Activities)

a. You have been hired by the local group, Global Hopemakers, to accompany a group of Russian business people from St. Petersburg. Introduce yourself and tell them where they'll be staying and what kind of institutions and companies they will be visiting.

b. One visitor is very interested in how we make automobiles.[10] Answer his/her questions. You will probably want to address the following issues: How many automobile factories do we have in the area? What automobiles do we make here? What is the size of the factories? What is the name of the company?

c. Invite one of the guests to a restaurant for a dinner with local business people.

In this manner, without a great deal of effort we can, at the very least, convince students of business language that we are aware of their needs and anxious to meet them.

As we compose and implement role-plays such as those above, there are some basic principles we should keep in mind. First of all, as Erwin Tshirner has pointed out in a recent article, role-playing is an output activity. In contrast to input activities which are designed to present new language functions, output activities have the goal of recycling and improving previously introduced material.[11] As the most open-ended of output activities, therefore, role-plays require considerable preparation, especially at the elementary level.[12] As mentioned earlier, showing native speakers engaged in similar exchanges on video can be a very beneficial form of preparation. Giving students the assignment of looking up information about relevant areas of Russian culture is another possibility. Turning to the role-play itself, our first task is to make certain that the situation is clear and easily understood. In addition, the student should understand what his/her role is, where and when the situation takes place and what the purpose of the conversation is. As the skill level increases and problem-solving becomes a larger factor, the latter requirement becomes more and more important. In order to adequately fulfil his/her mission the student needs to be very clear about the nature of the task. Beyond clarity and understanding, we should

also be sure to give the students as many choices as possible. As Pat Patison states, "the more the learners can decide for themselves, the more successful the role-plays."[13]

In advanced courses, rather sophisticated utilization is possible, especially when students have worked with role-plays since the elementary level. There are obviously, many different types of simulation exercises that can be successfully employed in advanced courses. In the interest of brevity I will give only a few examples, and my list should not be considered exhaustive.

One useful format for higher level role-plays is the interview. For this activity students in a small group divide themselves into reporters and those interviewed and act out the following scenario:

> A delegation of Russian entrepreneurs who have recently opened successful retail establishments in St Petersburg has just arrived in the U.S. Three or four reporters for local television stations are on hand to interview the delegation. At the end of the 3-5 minutes interviews, each reporter will be required to give a three-four minute news report on what he/she learned.

Suggested Questions and Possible Answers

1. How have you improved the services offered by your store?
    a. Training was provided to the staff.
    b. Salaries were increased .
    c. Hours were extended into the evening.
    d. The store procedures for buying goods were changed from the outmoded procedures employed previously to a self-service system as in the West. (The reporter might ask at this point how problems like theft, endemic to the Western system, might be solved).

2. How have you changed management practice?

   a. the enterprise was privatized.

   b. a work collective of all employees bought the store, but a group of seven put up most of the money and runs the operation.

These exchanges are relatively sophisticated, of course, and preparation as well as extensive group work will be necessary. In this case, I suggest that the students read and discuss newspaper articles that treat these issues. The above scenario was based on an article from the *New York Times*, but analogous material can be found in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Kommersant*, *Delovye ljudi* and similar publications both in Russian and English. For homework, students might also be assigned the task of researching Russian retail practice in the library. As a follow-up activity, teachers should consider setting up a panel of students to judge the news reports and award the best one a prize.

A key ingredient of role-plays at the more advanced levels is problem solving. According to the ACTFL Proficiency Testing Manual, complications or conflicts should be present from intermediate level situations on up. Simulations involving problem solving can often be quite involved and may include both sides of a controversial issue. These situations are developed and complicated enough to justify calling them case studies as some investigators do.[14] The following situation describes a phenomenon which currently exists in Russia. Before performing it, students should once again be asked to read an article which describes the problem in detail.

Problem Solving and Negotiating

Students are broken into three groups.

Group one (3-5 students).

1. You are partners in a trucking firm in Russia. You have varied backgrounds in both business and security.[15]

2. You have observed that a number of foreign trucking firms have stopped sending shipments into Russia (CIS) because of the high incidence of highjackings on Russian roads, particularly of foreign trucks. You have come up with a solution to this problem. Your employees will meet foreign trucks at the border, transfer the loads, and transport them to Russian destinations.
3. You have purchased army surplus equipment such as troop carriers and weapons and have recruited veterans of the Afghan conflict to serve as guards.
4. Prepare an argument that will convince a needy Western firm to use your services.

Group two (3-5 students).

They are given the same instructions as the first group.

Group three (3-5 students).

1. You are the representatives of a German trucking firm that has been losing money in highjacked shipments to Russia. Discuss your options.
2. You have heard about a Russian firm that guarantees delivery in Russia for a charge. Decide what you require from such a service.
3. Make a list of your needs in preparation for negotiating for the services of this company.

Groups one and two have separate negotiations with group three, which in the end chooses the most lucrative offer.[16]

In this simulation all three groups are faced with problem solving tasks and an atmosphere of competition has been added to encourage the groups both to use the most convincing and appropriate language and to present a well-structured and reasonable offer.

The last simulation activity I would like to suggest is the corporation game. Students are divided into groups of five to seven. Each group is given a card on which is described the type of enterprise they work for, what they produce and who the main customers or clients are. It is up to the team to devise a sales strategy that will make their product attractive to the customer. As much as possible, these situations should be based on the current situation in Russia. For example, according to one scenario, the students work for a firm that has the distribution rights for Snickers and Bounty bars in Moscow. The sales team should discuss how they intend to market their product, what segments of the population they are targeting, and which media can be most effectively used for the campaign. There are many variations of this game and the students should be encouraged to add their own components as they go along.[17] An element of competition may be included by having two groups work on the same task and then having them present their results to a student panel which would select the most promising strategy.

The simulations suggested here are structured so that they require the use of business terms and practice, cultural information and problem solving, but at the same time, opportunities are presented for using language in a number of different ways, such as convincing, ordering, joking, insisting, etc.[18] Given that business leaders rank communicative ability high on the list of desired skills for potential employees, it is imperative that we as language teachers devote a significant portion of classtime to communicative activities like role-plays in which students practice performing real business functions.

Notes

[1] Svetlana Aleksandroff, *Business Russian: Russkij jazyk dlja delovyx ljudej* (Montpelier, VT: Russian Information Service, Inc., 1993), and I.F. Zhdanova, et al. *Business Russian: Self-Instructional Course for English Speaking Specialists*, (Moscow, Russkij jazyk, 1992).

[2] H. A. Merklein, "Languages for the World of Work," *Material Development Needs in the Uncommonly-Taught Languages: Priorities for the Seventies*, (Arlington, VA: CAL, 1975), p. 30.

[3] Patricia Cholakian, "Commercial French: An Opportunity for Innovative Classroom Techniques," *French Review* 54 (1981), pp. 666-671, and Christine Uber Grosse, "Attitudes Toward Language for Business at Two South Florida Universities," *Foreign Language Annals* 16 (1983), pp. 449-53.

[4] See Bruce T. Fryer, "Proficiency Guided Business Units in High School Foreign Language Classes," *Perspectives on Proficiency: Curriculum and Instruction* edited by T. Bruce Fryer and Frank Medley (Columbia, SC: SCOLT, 1986), pp. 102-103 and Wilga Rivers, "Curriculum, Student Objectives, and the Training of Foreign Language Teachers," *Babel* 23, 2 (October, 1988), pp. 5-7.

[5] Michael H. Long, "Group Work and Communicative Competence in the ESOL Classroom," in *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language*, edited by Robin C. Scarcella, Elaine S. Andersen and Stephen D. Krashen (New York: Newbury House, 1990), p. 311.

[6] Long, p. 311.

[7] For a useful treatment of the social rules of language and their implications for language teachers see Christina Bratt Paulston, "Linguistic and Communicative Competence," in *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language*, pp. 287-302.

[8] Clara O-ban, "Multi-Skills Commercial Second Language Curriculum Meets the Videocamera," *The French Review*, vol 67, No. 3 (February, 1994), p. 422.

[9] *Russian for Everybody*, ed. by V. Kostomarov, adapted by Robert L. Baker (Moscow: Russian Language, 1990).

[10] Lansing, Michigan is an automotive production center and the headquarters of the Oldsmobile Division of General Motors Corporation. I have found that the inclusion of local "realia" references is effective in increasing the interest of students.

[11] Erwin Tschirner, "From Input to Output: Communication-Based Teaching Techniques," *Foreign Language Annals*, 25, No. 6 (1992), p. 513.

[12] Tschirner, pp. 516-517.

[13] Pat Patison, *Developing Communication Skills*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 64.

[14] Ann R. Dow and Joseph T. Ryan, Jr. "Preparing the Language Student for Professional Interaction," a chapter in *Interactive Language Teaching*, by Wilga M. Rivers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 194-210.

[15] Judith Ingram, "Riding Shotgun in Capitalist Russia," *New York Times* , 15 February, 1994, Sec. C, pp. 1-2.

[16] Long, pp. 311-312.

[17] Emily Spinelli, "Principles, Content and Activities for the Foreign Language Business Curriculum," *Journal of Language for International Business* 2, p. 5.

[18] Long, p. 313.